

Recent observations of the Western Tylas Vanga *Tylas (eduardi) albigularis*.

Frank Hawkins

Résumé: La race nominale du Vanga Tylas *Tylas eduardi* est commune dans la forêt humide du Madagascar oriental. La sous-espèce occidentale *albigularis* est connue de peu de spécimens et a rarement été observée. La présente note rapporte les observations récentes qui étendent l'aire de répartition de l'espèce et formule des hypothèses sur les causes de la rareté de la sous-espèce occidentale. Celles-ci comprennent la compétition d'espèces semblables et la réduction de l'étendue forestière récente. La possibilité d'une migration interne est examinée.

The Tylas Vanga *Tylas eduardi* is a common bird in the eastern and central forests of Madagascar¹. It often joins mixed-species flocks and has several loud calls which make it easy to detect. It is found from sea-level to 2000 m, and is one of the commonest birds at high altitudes^{1,2}. A western form, *T.e. albigularis*, was described as a subspecies from a specimen collected near Morondava, central west Madagascar^{3,4}. There is some doubt about the species' membership of the Vangidae^{1,5}, where it was placed in 1960⁶, having been variously considered a monotypic family⁷, a Pycnonotid bulbul or in the Sturnidae⁸. More recent phylogenetic work places it in a clade with other vangas⁸. The western form is generally treated as a subspecies but appears to differ markedly in plumage, distribution and call.

Characters

The eastern form is well described in Langrand¹. It has a green-grey back, a complete black hood (with, rarely, sparse white flecking on the throat), a white line around the collar and deep orange-buff underparts. The western form is very distinct, being much paler on the breast and belly and having the throat white instead of black. Specimens and recent reports of western forms seem very variable in belly and breast colour, ranging from bright orange to white. The structure of specimens of the two forms seems very similar, though sample sizes of *T.(e.) albigularis* are small.

Previous records

Four specimens of *T.(e.) albigularis* now in the Musée Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle (MNHN), Paris, were all taken in 1872, from near Morondava (20°16'S, 44°18'E), probably from mangroves, as the labels say "Morondava Plage". Between the date of the last specimen and 1990, this form was only observed by Appert^{9,10}. He saw it only three times: one individual in western dry deciduous forest to the south-east of Ankazoabo (22°18'S

44°30'E), on 7 June 1961⁹ or 1962¹⁰; two individuals in mangroves near the southern subdesert at Morombe (21°47'S, 43°21'E) (25 September 1962); and two birds 15 km south of Morondava, also in mangroves (10 June 1965). The first individual was in a mixed species flock with Ashy Cuckoo-shrikes *Coracina cinerea*, Rufous Vangas *Schetba rufa* and Madagascar Bulbul *Hypsipetes madagascariensis*, the second two either with a flock of Blue Vangas *Cyanolanius madagascarinus*¹⁰ or in a mixed flock of Blue Vangas, Ashy Cuckoo-shrikes and Madagascar Bulbuls⁹. The 1965 pair were alone.

Recent records

During 22 months fieldwork in western Malagasy forests, 1990-1993, I saw Western Tylas Vanga five times at three different sites.

i. Andranomena Special Reserve/Ampataka Classified Forest (20°10'S 44°30'E), 30 km north-west of Morondava, Province of Toliara, 18 and 19 August 1991. A group of three was seen on consecutive days 5 km west of Marofandilia, next to the Route Nationale 8, which links Morondava and Belo-sur-Tsiribihina, in primary deciduous western forest. They were in a flock with three White-headed Vangas *Leptopterus viridis*, two Blue Vangas and three Ashy Cuckoo-shrikes. One showed extensive pale orange areas on the base of each mandible, and was perhaps a juvenile. Two of the four specimens of *T.e. albigularis* in the MNHN (Paris) appear to show the same bill coloration. One caught a caterpillar and held it between a branch and its foot while pecking at it. The only call noted was a quiet three-note whistle ("whit-whit-whit"), apparently a contact call and similar to calls made by the eastern form. All three were very pale orange underneath.

ii. Baly (16°04'S, 45°16'E), 120 km south-west of Mahajanga, Province of Mahajanga, 18 February 1993. At least two birds were present in a mixed species flock in a small raised patch of western deciduous forest

nearly surrounded by mudflats, 3 km north of Baly. They were in a mixed-species flock with three White-headed Vangas, two Hook-billed Vangas *Vanga curvirostris* and about three Crested Drongos *Dicrurus forficatus*. All had dark bills and were brighter orange beneath than the birds at Andranomena, 460 km to the south-east. They used the same contact call as those at Andranomena, but in addition made a loud, single, fluty whistle rather like a White-headed Vanga.

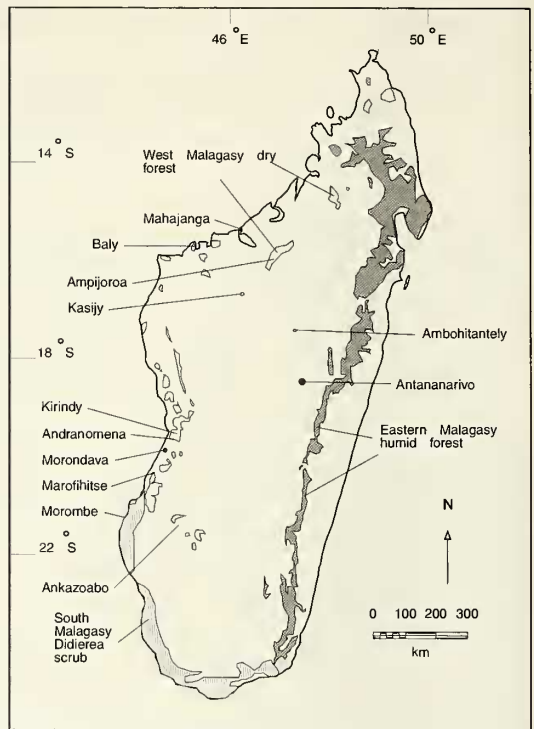
iii. Kirindy forest (20°03'S 44°43'E), 50 km north-west of Morondava, Province of Toliara, 14 July 1993. A single bird was seen in a mixed-species flock with five White-headed Vangas, three Blue Vangas, three Chabert's Vangas *Leptopterus chabert*, and four Long-billed Greenbuls *Phyllastrephus madagascariensis*, in primary western deciduous forest. It fed in a typical sally-gleaning insectivore fashion, perching briefly on horizontal branches at 4-6 m height and flying 1-2 m between perches in, as Appert¹⁰ remarks, a similar fashion to an Ashy Cuckoo-shrike. It was a dull orange-buff underneath.

Presumably the same bird was seen on the 15 and 16 September 1993, about 400 m from the July site. It was singing loudly and characteristically *whitoo-whit*, *whitoo-whit*, the last note of the phrase strongly slurred upwards, from 5 m high perches in primary western deciduous forest. The song was tape-recorded and a copy has been deposited at the National Sound Archive, Wildlife Section. Similar calls have been noted from eastern Tylas Vangas¹.

Discussion

The remarkable aspect of these sightings is their rarity. I have spent a total of seven weeks in Andranomena/Ampataka, five weeks in forests around Baly, and 22 weeks in Kirindy, for a total of five sightings. In addition, I have spent four weeks in forest 80 km to the south of Morondava (at Marofihitse, 20°47'S 44°01'E and Amparehitse, 20°51'S 44°06'E), between the sites of Appert's 1962 and 1965 sightings, and 24 weeks at Ampijoroa Forestry Station (16°20'S 46°45'E), Mahajanga Province, without once seeing the species. It has by far the lowest encounter rate of any western forest bird, despite being more widely spread than many, and being easy to detect where it does occur, having a loud, distinctive call and frequenting mixed species flocks. The lack of singing Tylas Vangas in the Andranomena/Ampataka/Kirindy forest area and at Ampijoroa in October-January is particularly puzzling.

While Appert¹⁰ speculated that the western Tylas Vanga might be more common in mangroves than elsewhere, recent observations seem to indicate that it is rare everywhere. I have spent short periods in or near



Madagascar showing current forest cover in the three main forest types and localities mentioned in the text.

Carte de Madagascar indiquant l'actuelle couverture forestière des trois principaux types de forêt et les localités mentionnées dans le texte.

mangroves with only the results described above, but O. Langrand (pers comm 1993) has explored other such areas without success.

It is possible that competition from similar species in western forest limits its range to mangrove and mangrove edge, whereas the nominate form can co-exist with these potential competitors in the eastern rainforests owing to the much greater structural diversity of the forest. At Andasibe, in eastern Malagasy rainforest, Eguchi *et al*¹¹ found Tylas Vangas and Ashy Cuckoo-shrikes to be very similar in foraging style. The major difference was that Tylas Vangas fed more consistently in the canopy, above 10 m, and Ashy Cuckoo-shrike spent more time in the mid-storey. Ashy Cuckoo-shrikes took more prey from twigs and the air than did Tylas Vangas. The latter used branches and trunks more often, but both took more than 50% of food items by gleaning from leaves.

In western forests, Ashy Cuckoo-shrikes sometimes conflict with Rufous Vangas, as both forage in the shrub-layer and take insects from overhanging leaf-clumps (A F A Hawkins unpublished data). However, western populations of Ashy Cuckoo-shrikes also spend

a lot of time foraging in the canopy and take aerial food less often than they do in the east¹¹. Thus, *Tylas Vangas* in western forests might be trying to feed in an already well-filled niche. No conflict has been observed between *Tylas Vangas* and these other species however, and both Appert⁹ and I have recorded western *Tylas Vangas* in mixed flocks with Ashy Cuckoo-shrikes.

All eight recent records of western *Tylas Vangas* are in the austral winter or late summer (February), while fieldwork in October-January has not produced any. This suggests that the birds only winter in the west. A possible breeding area is the western slopes of the central highlands. *Tylas Vangas* at Ambohitantely (18°08'S 47°16'E), in the western part of the central highlands, have both white and dark throats (O. Langrand pers. comm. 1994). The phylogenetic status of these intermediate populations is not known, but it suggests that the populations are not completely allopatric and a hybrid zone may exist.

The modern rarity of the western form might be explained by the severe reduction in surface area of forests in the central-western highlands in the last thousand years¹². Visits to highland forests such as Kasijy Special Reserve (16°25'S 46°10'E), and Ambohitantely during the winter period are required to assess the status of *Tylas Vanga* at this season.

Rather conflicting with this theory is the current lack of unequivocal evidence of internal migration in any endemic Malagasy passerine. Many vangas (for instance Red-tailed Vanga *Calicalicus madagascariensis*, Bernier's Vanga *Oriolia bernieri* and Helmet Vanga *Euryceros prevostii*) are very patchily distributed^{1,2,9} and the perceived rarity of western *Tylas Vangas* may simply be due to areas of dense populations remaining undiscovered. Many areas of western forest have never been thoroughly investigated for birds. Clearly, the answer to these and other questions relating to forest-bird distributions lies in more fieldwork, in particular in remote forest patches.

Acknowledgements

Permission to conduct research in Madagascar was granted by the Tripartite Commission, under a Protocol of Collaboration between Dr J Ganzhorn of the University of Tübingen and the Ministry of Universities of the Government of Madagascar. I would like to thank Dr Ganzhorn, Prof. Mme. Berthe Rakotosamimanana and Adeline Zafisela for their advice and assistance. I would like to thank all the organisations that supported my work in Madagascar: WWF-Madagascar Ecology Training Programme, Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, the British Ornithologists' Union, the British Ecological Society, and British Airways-Assisting Nature Conser-

vation. I have benefited from and enjoyed discussions with O. Langrand, S Goodman, T Schulenberg, R Safford and S Zack. ☉

References

1. Langrand O. 1990. *Guide to the birds of Madagascar*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
2. Evans, M.I., Duckworth, J.W., Hawkins, A.F.A., Safford, R.J., Sheldon, B.C. and Wilkinson, R.J. 1992. Key bird species of Marojejy Strict Nature Reserve, Madagascar. *Bird Conservation International* 2: 201-220
3. Hartlaub, G. 1877. *Die Vögel Madagaskars und der benachbarten Inselgruppen*. Halle.
4. Dee, T. J. 1986. *The endemic birds of Madagascar*. Cambridge: ICBP.
5. Olson, S.L. 1989. Preliminary systematic notes on some old world passerines. *Riv. Ital. Orn.* 59: 183-195.
6. Delacour, J. 1960. A propos des affinités systématiques de deux oiseaux malgaches: *Tylas eduardi* et *Hypositta corallirostris*. *L'Oiseau et R.F.O.* 30: 259-269.
7. Oberholser, H.C. 1917. Diagnosis of a new laniine family of Passeriformes [Tylidae]. *Journal of Washington Academy of Sciences* 7: 180-181
8. Schulenberg, T. 1993. Phylogeny of the Vangidae; inferences from mitochondrial DNA. *Proc. 8th Pan-African Ornithological Congress*: 23-28
9. Appert, O. 1968. La répartition géographique des vangidés dans la région du Mangoky et la question de leur présence aux différentes époques de l'année. *L'Oiseau et R.F.O.* 38: 6-19.
10. Appert, O. 1970. Zur biologie der Vangawurger (Vangidae) sudwest-Madagaskars. *Orn. Beob.* 67: 101-133.
11. Eguchi, K., Yamagishi, S and Randrianasolo, V. 1993. The composition and foraging behaviour of mixed species flocks of forest-living birds in Madagascar *Ibis* 134: 91-96.
12. Dewar, R. 1984. Extinctions in Madagascar. In Martin, P.S. and Klein, R.G. (eds); 574-593 *Quaternary extinctions; a prehistoric revolution*. Phoenix, Arizona: University of Arizona Press.

10 Lodway Gardens, Pill, Bristol BS20 0DL, UK.

Editorial note: A paper which appeared in January 1995 suggests that *Tylas* is actually an oriole and not a vanga at all (Appert, O. 1994. Is there a representative of the Oriolidae in Madagascar? - a contribution to the systematics of the genus *Tylas*. *Orn. Beob* 91: 255-267).